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Paradigms of World History and American Technology

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Paradigms of World History and American Technology

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Editor, *Interface*

INTRODUCTION

This is the first of a three-part editorial essay dealing with how best to understand long-term historical patterns of economic development. We are particularly interested in the relative importance of technology as a lead factor in facilitating development. Our purpose is to place the past and future development of American computing and electronics industries into an appropriate historical framework. In this issue we lay out the issues involved and introduce two conflicting paradigms or perspectives.

The issue can be simply framed: within what long-term framework should we properly view the creativity of the late 20th century that produced the technologically driven period of rapid American economic growth? To restate this question in terms of our mission at the Berglund Center for Internet Studies, let us ask: "In what historical framework should we understand the development of the Internet and its consequent impact on how we live, study and work?" related questions include: "Is the past success of the industries we vaguely lump together as "computing," an indication of continuing American dominance in the world economy? Will the same factors that produced them continue to guarantee American success and creativity vis-à-vis others?"

Our Approach

If the question can be simply stated, however, any answer to it is obviously and necessarily a very complicated one. Here our approach is to look at the problem as considered from the perspective of world history over more than 1500 years.

We take this broad approach because we are, in fact, asking an even more fundamental question: Is there something unique about Western European patterns of growth and their economic success that we take for granted? Is the triumph of the Western pattern of growth in effect a guarantee that over the long run, that pattern, as now embodied in the American economy, will continue to dominate over all other competitors? Is this true even for those Asian economies such as those of China, Taiwan, and India that are becoming so closely intertwined with these industries?

If these assumptions are based on an accurate understanding of the past then it is not necessary to take seriously, let alone to develop appropriate policy for issues such as these currently facing the United States:

- Outsourcing. Why worry about the outsourcing of jobs if we can count on American creativity and superior innovative capacities continually to develop products and processes upstream from our outsourced workshops, whether industrial or digital?
- R&D Funding. Why worry about the level of research and development funding if these investments are ultimately not necessary? Haven't market forces and our superior financial structures, such as the modern corporation, always created appropriate products as they have become useful and advantageous?
- International Policy. Given that America now embodies the earlier European industrial, political, military, and economic dominance, even to the point of having achieved what is increasingly and frankly labeled as "hegemony," why do we need to concern ourselves overly much about cooperation, even in matters dealing with technology, as opposed to leadership? [1]
- Technological Progress. Given that our historic talents and abilities seem to come together most successfully in the development and exploitation of technology, as represented most recently in the .com boom and our domination of a world-girdling English-language denoted system of communication like the World Wide Web, cannot we expect our leadership to continue indefinitely?

Underlying such assumptions as these, as we will demonstrate below, is the belief that there is something unique about first, Western European, and then American culture. Further, these unique factors have been responsible for our success; they have created the very world in which we live. If these perspectives are correct, then any downturns in our progress will be temporary ones; simple scallops in an inevitable, continual, triumphal rise.

One way to test these assumptions, of course, is to see to what degree they are truly founded in underlying inherent factors, or whether or not they may be overstated, relative to certain times and places, or are contingent upon factors external to Western Europe and the United States, rather than internal ones.

Competing Paradigms of World History: The Eurocentric

There are now two competing schools of thought on the patterns of world history. We sum them up the first with these words by David S. Landes:

Until very recently, over the thousand and more years of this process that most people look upon as progress, the key factor—the driving force—has been Western civilization and its dissemination: the knowledge, the techniques, the political and social ideologies, for better or worse. This dissemination flows partly from Western dominion, for knowledge and know-how equal power; partly from Western teaching; and partly from emulation. Diffusion has been uneven, and much Western example has been rejected by people who see it as aggression. [2]

This statement, from Landes' work *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations. Why Some Are So Rich and Some Are So Poor*, very effectively states the received wisdom. This is the world history that Americans, at least, have learned since well before World War II. Moreover, the perspective is so deeply imbedded in our view not only of the world, but also of ourselves, that it seems unassailable. Professor Landes, whose work was widely hailed as the definitive statement on economic development, is a most thorough and thoughtful scholar as well as a wonderfully lively writer. He is held by many to have more than demonstrated the truth of the above analysis. [3]

The Critics of Eurocentrism:

However, there are also contrary views, represented by an increasing number of scholars from both the United States and abroad. [4] This group is so diverse that it is difficult to typify them other than to say that attack the Eurocentric approach from a variety of perspectives.

Some of these scholars argue that the Eurocentric view as represented above by Landes is frankly mistaken; that Asia, in fact, led the West for a very long period and that the period of European triumph is a very recent one, and by no means necessarily a permanent one.

Some, like Andre Gunde Frank, confront the Eurocentric paradigm head on, arguing:

Europe was certainly not central to the world economy before 1800. Europe was not hegemonic structurally, nor functionally, nor in terms of economic weight, or of production, technology or productivity nor in per capita consumption, nor in any way in its development of allegedly more “advanced” capitalist institutions...in all these respects, the economies of Asia were far more “advanced” and its Chinese Ming/Qing, Indian Mughal, and even Persian Safavid and Turkish Ottoman empires carried much greater political and even military weight than any or all of Europe. [5]

Some, like Janet Abu-Lughod, see not a European rise, but an Asian fall:

Of crucial importance is the fact that the “Fall of the East” preceded the “Rise of the West,” and it was this devolution of the preexisting system that facilitated Europe’s easy conquest. It would be wrong, therefore, to view the “Rise of the West” as either a simple takeover of a prior

functioning system or an event whose outcome was attributable exclusively to the internal characteristics of European society. [6]

Others, while taking a more nuanced approach than does Frank, essentially agree that not only is the European dominance over-stated, but that in large part it was due not to such factors listed by Landes as: "...partly from Western dominion, for knowledge and know-how equal power; partly from Western teaching; and partly from emulation." But, rather it arose not out of Western strengths but from weaknesses. Piracy and pillage, exploitation and slavery, were preferable to trade and commerce precisely because of Western inferiority in these peaceable pursuits relative to other parts of the world. [7]

It is clear in reviewing the above extended quotations that more is at stake here than simple questions of fact. The scholars ranged on either side have invested the discussion with a heated language rarely encountered in academic discourses. Landes, for example, sees most criticisms of the above statement of the Western European pattern of development as wrong-headed, ideologically driven, and arguing not from honest disagreements or differing interpretations of evidence, but out of contemporary aberrations such as political correctness and post-modernism. [8]

For their part, the opponents of the Eurocentric analysis sometimes see the status quo as defended primarily by self-serving supporters of an exploitative structure that oppresses lesser-developed economies. [9]

Conclusion

Behind these opposing paradigms is a very real question that merits serious examination: in what sort of long-term framework should we properly view the creativity of the late 20th century that produced the technologically driven period of rapid American economic growth?

In our next two editorial essays we shall analyze first the Eurocentric analyses, then its critical alternatives. This is a complex extended intellectual journey—after all we are looking at world history itself—but we hope you will find it a worthwhile one. (Part II has been published and can be found at <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2005/07/edit.php>)

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[1] See the *Project for the New American Century* at: <http://www.newamericancentury.org/>

[2] Landes, David S. *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations. Why Some Are So Rich and Some Are So Poor.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. p. 513

[3] The work has been enthusiastically hailed in financial and political circles in particular. It is

evident that Landes' arguments have struck an important chord in contemporary American culture. His arguments have been extended by some to argue even that the European advantage is not only cultural, as Landes believes, but even genetic. See the final draft of the review by Steve W. Sailer, eventually published in *National Review*, found at: <http://www.isteve.com/wealth.htm> For a strong supportive review that brings up many of the points which made the book so popular, see that by J. Bradford DeLong, Professor of Economics at U.C. Berkeley, found at: http://econ161.berkeley.edu/Econ_Articles/Reviews/landes.html Finally, for excerpts from some of the many other very positive reviews see <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/product-description/0393318885/104-9057002-3835169>

[4] See in particular. Frank, Andre Gunde. *ReOrient: Global economy in the Asian Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

[5] Frank, 5.

[6] Abu-Lughod, Janet. *Before European Hegemony. The World System A.D. 1250-1350*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. p. 361.

[7] For a very much more thoughtful and detailed explanation than my own summary above, see Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence, China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. Princeton University Press, 2000., Chapter VI.

[8] Professor Landes, uses such terms as "Asian chauvinists" (531), and "Western sinologists zealous in their political correctness.." (27) to characterize opposing scholars, derides electronic sites where opposing arguments appear as "a magnet for fallacies and fantasies" (54), and refers to their positions as "new myth" (348) and "fantasy history" (406). His ultimate criticism would seem to be to label his opponents as "politically correct" (see 409, 530). These essentially personal attacks are seldom encountered when discussing historiographic arguments!

[9] For both a very thorough cataloguing of Landes' extreme statements delivered with an acerbic tone that often mirrors Landes' own, see Andre Gunde Frank's review of Landes' work, "A Review of David Landes' *The Wealth And Poverty of Nations*. November 28, 1998" at: http://www.reorient.net/html/frank_on_landes.html Accessed October 14, 2005.

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